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McFarlane Aide Facilitates Policy

Marine Officer Nurtures Connections With Contras, Conservatives

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By Joanne Omang
Washington Post Staff Writer

In a city of largely invisible staff workers, Marine Corps Lt. Col. Oliver L. North of the National Security Council staff has emerged as an influential and occasionally controversial character in the implementation of the Reagan administration's foreign policy.

North, a trusted aide to national security affairs adviser Robert C. McFarlane, has by most accounts been obedient and creative in his work, which has thrust him into a pivotal role in the administration's Central American policy—particularly in nurturing connections among antigovernment rebels in Nicaragua, their conservative supporters in this country and the rest of the administration.

But his work on behalf of McFarlane has taken North into other areas as well, testimony in part to his diligence and high energy. North was involved in drafting a letter from President Reagan to Syrian President Hafez Assad that reportedly angered Assad and irritated State Department officials who tried to have it altered.

He is little known to the public, but to those in the administration and among those actively involved in the debate over Central American policy, North has been a visible player.

In that capacity, his activities raise questions about a gray area of government policy. At a time when Congress had voted to outlaw direct aid to the anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua, North worked actively to assure the counterrevolutionaries, or contras, that the U.S. government fully supported their cause.

Administration officials insist that

North stayed within the letter and spirit of the October 1984 law, which ended three years of U.S. intelligence community help for the contras. The administration had fought the ban, arguing that the rebels, which it calls "freedom fighters," were key to pressuring the leftist Sandinista government of Nicaragua away from its Soviet supporters.

But Congress acted out of concern that the insurgents had been using secret U.S. funds illegally in trying to overthrow the Sandinista government, and that contra methods had been brutal and immoral. The checks that went out in May were the last of an estimated \$80 million in U.S. aid.

McFarlane said in an interview he had told his staff to comply with the law. "However, we had a national interest in keeping in touch with what was going on, and, second, in not breaking faith with the freedom fighters," he said.

"What does it mean not to break faith? Nothing more or less than making it clear that the United States believes in what they are doing," McFarlane continued. "We could not provide any support, but we made it clear we would continue seeking that support" from Congress.

"We wanted to give a continuity of policy. This could not involve money or material support. It was a matter of hand-holding," he added.

North, 42, he indicated, was put in charge of holding hands.

In part as a result of North's efforts, Congress last month approved \$27 million in nonmilitary aid to the rebels, ending a virtual seven-month halt in their activity.

Interviews with dozens of people who know North found general agreement that his power is the kind that comes from being the center of an information network, trusted by superiors and contacts to interpret his knowledge for their mutual benefit. While his recommendations have sometimes been rejected, they have always figured heavily in policy debates.

If McFarlane is Reagan's senior national security adviser, North is "McFarlane's McFarlane," one senior government official said, "except that he's much more activist than McFarlane."

North said he was willing to be interviewed, but McFarlane refused. "He's not a rogue elephant" but rather "like a son of mine," McFarlane said.

In an article in Friday's editions, The Washington Post withheld North's name at the request of White House spokesman Larry Speakes, who said North was concerned about his safety. North's name has been used by other news organizations, and White House officials were informed on Friday that The Post intended to use North's name in this article unless there was a compelling reason not to do so.

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